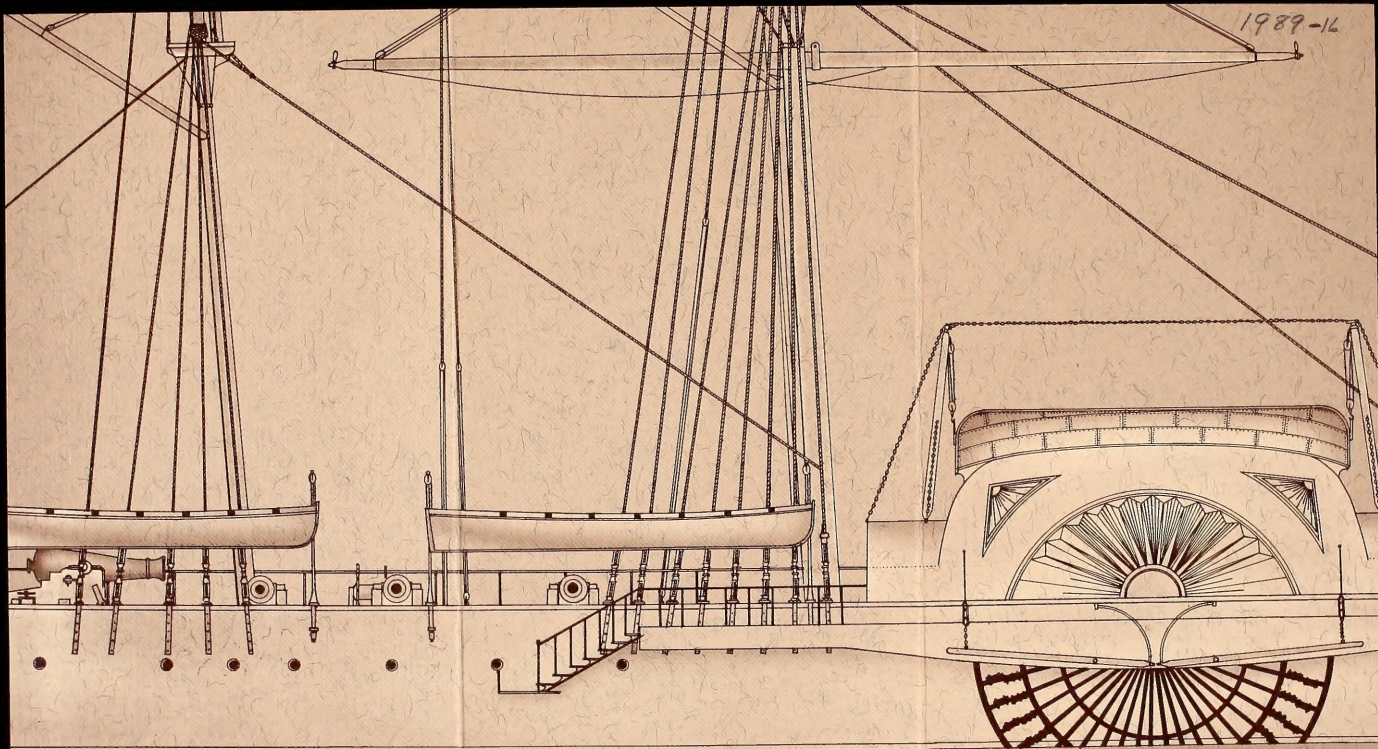




 **LINCOLN
NATIONAL**
LIFE INSURANCE
COMPANY
FORT WAYNE, INDIANA 46801

ABRAHAM LINCOLN
AND THE TRENT AFFAIR:
CHRISTMAS, 1861

A HOLIDAY EXHIBIT
AT THE LOUIS A. WARREN
LINCOLN LIBRARY
AND MUSEUM, 1989

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The words "Victorian Christmas" may bring to mind the "visions of sugar-plums" of Clement Clarke Moore's "Twas the Night Before Christmas," or the beauty and spectacle of Tchaikovsky's "Nutcracker Suite." In fact, this image of Christmas—as a special day free from normal concerns and chores, and as a family-centered celebration with bountiful gifts, special holiday food, and extravagant decorations—is an accurate description of the way only a few Victorian Americans spent Christmas Day. Only the middle and upper classes could have afforded to celebrate it this way, and more to the point, the Victorian period spanned over 60 years (1837-1901). In this time, the American celebration of Christmas changed from a mostly-religious event celebrated by only a few ethnic groups to a more secular event observed by a larger percentage of the population.

We do not know what kind of Christmas the Lincolns hoped for in 1861, but their Christmas could not have been like the Victorian Christmas of legend. The Lincolns were doting parents, and the president took special delight in the antics of his young sons. Nevertheless,

even if extravagant gifts had been piled under the White House Christmas tree, Lincoln could not have enjoyed the resulting bedlam of unwrapping that morning as much as he might have another time.

The Lincoln administration was in the midst of a diplomatic crisis, and any joy Lincoln might have shared with his family must have been overshadowed by his concerns for the nation. In early November Captain Charles Wilkes, of the U.S.S. *San Jacinto* had stopped the British mail steamer *Trent* and seized four passengers from the ship: James Murray Mason, Confederate envoy to England; John Slidell, Confederate envoy to France; and their two secretaries. Northerners treated the incident as a Union victory and made a hero out of Wilkes, but the British were outraged with what they called a breach of international law. The British cabinet drafted an ultimatum demanding the release of Mason and Slidell and threatening war if the United States refused. The slowness of trans-Atlantic travel meant that Lincoln did not receive the dispatch until more than a month after the incident—just a few days before Christmas. The ultimatum put the

Lincoln administration in an awkward position: they could ill afford to fight two wars at once, and yet, if Lincoln caved in too easily, the public would fault him for weakness. As Lincoln explained, "we too, as well as Great Britain, have a people justly jealous of their rights."

On Christmas Day, 1861, Lincoln met for four tension-filled hours (from 10 to 2) with his cabinet, discussing how to react to the British threat. With "great reluctance" the cabinet and the president agreed that they would have to give Mason and Slidell up. Still, the issue was not completely resolved in the president's mind, and he proposed to draft a counter argument for keeping the men. He must have continued to worry at the problem during what little of the afternoon he had left for his family, before the formal White House Christmas dinner that night. Sometime that afternoon or evening he must finally have resolved the matter in his own mind because after the party he told his friend, Orville Browning, definitively that, "there would be no war with England." Perhaps this resolution of an international crisis was the best Christmas present Lincoln could have hoped for.